

UTSAV, a mixed use experimental building complex

In November 2019, Auroville Today introduced UTSAV (meaning 'Celebration'), a combined commercial and residential project which aimed to bring new energy on a major Radial of the Industrial Zone. Now that phase 1A has been completed, Auroville Today talked to Mona, the architect who initiated and supervised the project. What have been the challenges? How successfully have the original objectives been fulfilled, and if there have been changes, what are they and why were they made? And what has she learned from the process?

Auroville Today: In our 2019 interview you listed some of the initial challenges you faced. As an architect you had chosen to initiate the project, which is not what normally happens, and then you had to get building permission, go for a lengthy tender process, raise the finance, find a project holder and register UTSAV under an Auroville Trust which would take responsibility for the project. And all this before you had even started construction.

Mona: Yes. But we did get building permission, Auromics Trust agreed to be our umbrella organisation, Bobby agreed to be the Project Holder and we had two or three bookings and big hopes! But before we could finally start construction, Covid struck, and this slowed everything down. Finally, we could start only in September 2020. We had many challenges to finish the project, including those who booked not paying up in time, not enough bookings to keep the project running and the Ukraine War with prices rising. Then there was the ruling of the National Green Tribunal which stopped all city construction, and other additional blockages from the Town Development Council. But every time I would appeal to The Mother and she would give me just a little bit of hope, a little more money from somewhere, and with a lot of goodwill from the contractor, Nalla Builders (Baskar) and support from the Project Holder (Bobby), we managed to keep afloat. All this explains why it took us about 3 years to complete the first phase. Finally in November 2023 the first units were ready. So a project initiated in 2017 got completed in 2023!

The original idea was to have commercial units on the ground and first floor with accommodation for volunteers in the apartments above, and one of your hopes was that the units would attract Auroville startups / young entrepreneurs. How did that work out?

My original idea was to have young people's commercial start-ups, which is why I designed small spaces, but I realised it's impossible for young people to afford these places. Even if they could manage to get a 10.5 lakh loan for our cheapest unit, the interest payment would be just too much for them. So we have only managed to accommodate one start-up, and he is still having difficulty in making the final payment.

The volunteers' accommodation idea also changed. I approached Savi, which looks after volunteers, to finance some units on the second floor, but that didn't work out, then I hoped that YouthLink would be interested but that didn't materialise either. Originally, I designed very simple accommodation with shared bathrooms, but people told me that nobody wants to share bathrooms these days. So in the end I decided to make apartments because I thought these are always needed. But these were not taken immediately either, as nobody could afford the cost, 35 or 40 lakhs, of a two bedroom apartment. Many wanted ground floor apartments with small gardens! In November 2022 the situation became very difficult because many of the units had not been taken and we didn't have the money to finish the construction.

Was there a tipping point when you found enough people to finance the project?

It was difficult until January 2023 when Akash and Monica came in with Cynergy and The Sprout café (they had been looking for the "right" place for 6 years). They took five units, and soon after Aurelio took the entire top floor for Svaram Atelier research and therapy section. On the ground floor now there will be two cafés (a Naturellement outlet will open soon), and two garment outlets: Colours of Nature and Lively Boutique. On the first floor there is Kalya (Progress landscapes), Cynergy and Sarvam Computers (Bala), and Svaram Atelier is above.



Roadside view of UTSAV

The 'L' part of the building, at the rear of the building, has residences on all three floors.

Is it challenging to have a mix of accommodation and commercial units in one building?

Very! It's complicated because people who are living there want some privacy and don't want noise at night, but the people who are making money either want as many people as possible to come, and/or to stay open long hours. So we have an agreement that the cafés and offices should not be open after nine in the evening. At one point, one of the cafés wanted to put their tables in a corridor, but I had to say no as that area is for circulation and is paid for by everybody. Also the inner courtyard has been kept open for collective activities / events like food pop ups, open exhibitions, film screenings or music concerts.

There were also complications with accounting because Auroville does not have a structure for a mixed usage project like this. So, everybody's commercial project payments had to go through their unit, while for accommodation the money went through Housing.

What were your most important learnings?

One is that Auroville needs to create a framework that allows mixed-use buildings to come up. We don't have such a framework yet, which is why we got sandwiched between Housing and FAMC.

Then, at one point I realised I was no longer just an architect who was also doing project management. I had additionally become a de facto developer who had to 'sell' the project to potential buyers. It cost me much time, headaches and here I made all sorts of mistakes. I learned that developers normally have a large share of the money upfront before they attempt to start construction. If you don't have that and you're relying upon selling units to be able to start and continue constructing, it is an extremely difficult situation. Also I wanted to be very open with everybody about the costs and how I had arrived at a certain price: I kept perfect accounts of everything. But a developer from Ahmedabad told me that developers never do this: they never show their costings to any of their clients. In fact, normally neighbours will never know who paid what because each case is individually negotiated!

In the beginning it didn't matter, but when costs escalated towards the end by approximately 12%, people wanted to know how I had calculated certain things. Luckily I had kept clear accounts. I told them that the original agreement I had made with them was that this was a 'no profit, no loss' project and, over the time it took to complete it, of course there were cost overruns in

materials and labour, so these had to be shared. In fact, materials were bought under the UTSAV GST number and labour was sourced by Nalla Builders, so that helped to keep the costs down, but it meant a lot more work for my Studio.

In the end, UTSAV phase 1A cost 3.6 crores, which is about Rs 3,500 / square foot. It is not the cheapest, but it includes everything – the common areas, overhead and underground tanks, the biological wastewater treatment, covered garage, a generous entrance foyer, payments made to L'Avenir (without which we would not have got permission to start), water connection, a huge open parking area with some landscaping and quality construction, etc. – so I think it is still reasonable.

Then again, we gave everybody the possibility for air-conditioning. I learned this from other communities where AC was not designed for, because I feel that you cannot impose mental concepts, however well-intentioned, on people because life is not like that: we all change.

Another thing I learned was the need for extreme flexibility – not only in the design but also in my mind! So many things happen that are not planned and you have to be ready to adjust. It was good that I did a frame and modular construction for the building because when my original idea for small units or volunteer rooms didn't work out, I could easily modify internal spaces according to demand, while retaining the external façade.

At the same time, you can't be too flexible; sometimes you have to hold the line. For example, one of the unit managers wanted to put steel rolling shutters on the ground floor instead of the grills I had planned for security, but I told him that is not possible as I didn't want UTSAV to look like a dead city complex at night. Everyone made efforts and we found some harmonious solutions to individual problems. It is not as perfect as I would like it to be, but one can learn to live with that!

Overall, I think we managed quite well to do what we intended to do. My initial reference images in the project brochure show Connaught Place in New Delhi and European roadside cafés as inspirations to bring some "urban" character to the Radial. With the double height covered passage and the outdoor café sit-outs of The Sprout and the soon to open Bella Vita (Naturellement outlet), UTSAV will get a character that is urban and welcoming.

Will there be another phase?

Phase 1B will come, and this will be taken up by Miniature, the Italian designer clothing unit. But this time it should be much easier for me as I will only be dealing with one client.

Would you do a project like this again?

No, because I've made my learnings, which I am happy to share with others willing to try something like this out, although it will never be the same. I felt inspired to do this, and if things come to me, I think they are meant for my inner and outer growth.

From a conversation with Alan

Svaram's new milestone

On 29th February, Svaram inaugurated its new Sound Garden at the allocated 2-acre site for its projected campus in the Industrial Zone of Auroville, in the presence of Special Guests of Honour, Thiru R.N. Ravi, Governor of Tamil Nadu and Chairman of the Governing Board, and Dr. Tamilsai Soundararajan, the Governor of Telangana and Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry and member of the Governing Board. The colourful opening was also attended by Dr. Jayanti S. Ravi, IAS, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. This marked another milestone in the development of Svaram which, for over 20 years, has been creating musical instruments and conducting sound research, as well as running cultural programmes and personal growth/wellbeing trainings.

Aurelio, the founder of Svaram, along with co-executives Karthik and Shankar, spoke about this new milestone as well as the earlier days of the project (Aurovilian Jan and Magesh, who are also part of the core leading



A sound stone

team, could not be present).

Aurelio grew up in Austria, where for some time he studied music, philology and ethnology and attended courses at the Orff Institute, Salzburg. "It was set up by the composer Carl Orff after the Second World War because he said we cannot go through another of those disasters: the children of the world should play music together. So he started with something everybody could play, universal instruments like the African xylophone and percussions. Orff's idea was that that everyone can make music and benefit from its personality-building gifts."

After his studies Aurelio travelled for five years around the world, absorbing different musical traditions, including those of indigenous people for whom music was an intrinsic part of life. "Whether they soothed their children, or planted crops or were out fishing, there was always song, often accompanied by simple percussions and handmade instruments."

After an initial visit in 1986 Aurelio joined Auroville in 1991. Having worked in the cultural field



Metallophone



The storm drum

and the AV Dance Lab he joined Adishakti of the late Veenapani Chawla, one of India's foremost experimental theatre exponents, providing 'soundscapes' – sound backgrounds – to her theatre productions, and toured with them through Indian cities. "The instruments often needed repair, and that's how a workshop at Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevinagar got started," he explains. "After a year, we moved to the old Decauram carpentry workshop, where the Svaram development project began in 2003. We initiated a training course for a group of unemployed youth from the local villages who were eager to learn a new skill. I taught them basic music and tuning systems, Jan taught them carpentry and basic mathematical skills, and together we explored how to repair and make new instruments."

"We began with seven people," remembers Karthik. "We selected anybody with a musical interest and



The sound vortex

who wanted a job because at that time youth unemployment was very high in the villages. None of the original seven had any training in this work; I was a painter, there were also carpenters, mechanics and electricians. When we started, my village friends, who knew nothing about musical crafts, said 'Why are you wasting your time like this? There's no future in this'. Now they come to my house asking for support!"

Shankar experienced the same skepticism at first. "But now everybody looks up to me and respects our hard work."

Aurelio mentions that this is one of the most important aspects of Svaram's success. "I think we were the first outreach project that focused on life skills coupled with income generation in the villages, because we understood that once people earn their own money they acquire a certain dignity, there is empowerment, independence and sustainability."

Today Svaram has 86 employees and sells its many products in over 30

countries, in addition to running courses and trainings, and every month around 2,000 people visit its workshop, showroom and sound garden.

Svaram was not an overnight success, however. The first recruits had to learn the basics of music from Aurelio and from local teachers with knowledge of Indian classical music. "So for the first three years it was like college for us," says Karthik. The making of instruments began when Svaram received an initial grant from SAIIR for a project called 'instruments for a new music pedagogy'. "There was my research as well as volunteers coming from all over the world who brought knowledge and artisanal skills of different musical traditions. This is why we call what we make 'world music instruments', reflecting a common source of human heritage", says Aurelio.

In 2009, after a catastrophic fire, they created the actual production unit. Today, the products include a huge array of 'sound sources': wind,



From left: Shankar, Karthik and Aurelio

strings, skins and percussion instruments. There are also the famous 'sound stones', carefully cut stones which emit musical tones when rubbed with moistened hands.

The sound stones were a chance discovery of a German sculptor, further developed by a professor from Mozarteum University, but some of the other instruments are creations of the employees. "When people ask who designed an instrument because they like it so much, we have to explain it's actually the work of many people", says Karthik. "Sometimes I come with an idea and they laugh at it," says Aurelio, "so I have to secretly work on it with Jan before bringing it back to them. Then they say, 'Why did you make it in this complicated way?' and they change it around, and



Bamboo grove

finally we have a special product. It's really co-created. I can show you unique instruments that came out of this shared process. We are also working with co-management principles in action, and make all important decisions together."

In 2014 they were awarded a big



The listening ear

project for the new terminal of Mumbai airport, where they installed the largest tuned wind chimes in the world. A little later, they created a 'sound garden' for the Bangalore Music Experience Center, the first interactive music museum in India. "And that's when the outdoor installations started," says Aurelio. "But

Another aspect of their work is therapeutic, healing. Some years ago, a guest mentioned that she had had a wonderful experience in Europe with a 'sound bed' – a resonating bed with strings attached below – upon which she had experienced a 'sound massage', and asked if Svaram could make one. "My studies in music therapy resurfaced and we made the first one for Quiet Healing Centre," says Aurelio. "Today, you can say that 'sound healing' is emerging everywhere, and our instruments are exported to sound therapy circles all over the world. However, we are known as pioneers in introducing Indian Shruti, harmonic, just intonation tuning systems for these specific applications, rather than the international standard, equal tempered tuning, which is most common."

It is perhaps not coincidental that at a time when there is much disharmony in Auroville, that a new sound garden has opened. "Music has this universal appeal, it can bring us together," says Aurelio. "Sometimes in Svaram we get irritated because we are categorised as belonging to one side or another in the present dispute, and then we make clear we do not belong to anybody. We are in the creative centre; we are for harmonisation, not division. Often we have been trying to bring Aurovilians together for some event to cultivate communal coherence through a shared contemplative experience, where everybody can sing, play or listen to music together. We are providing a unifying cultural space; we don't want to exclude anybody. And even if it's a very difficult transition phase in Auroville at present, nothing will hold us back from the joy of creation and the gift of working happily together."

"We are generating income for Auroville and for the bioregion," says Karthik. "We are doing what is needed at present in Auroville, which is providing positive creative energy and a good name, but we are not doing it for this group or that group: our appeal is universal."



Humming stone

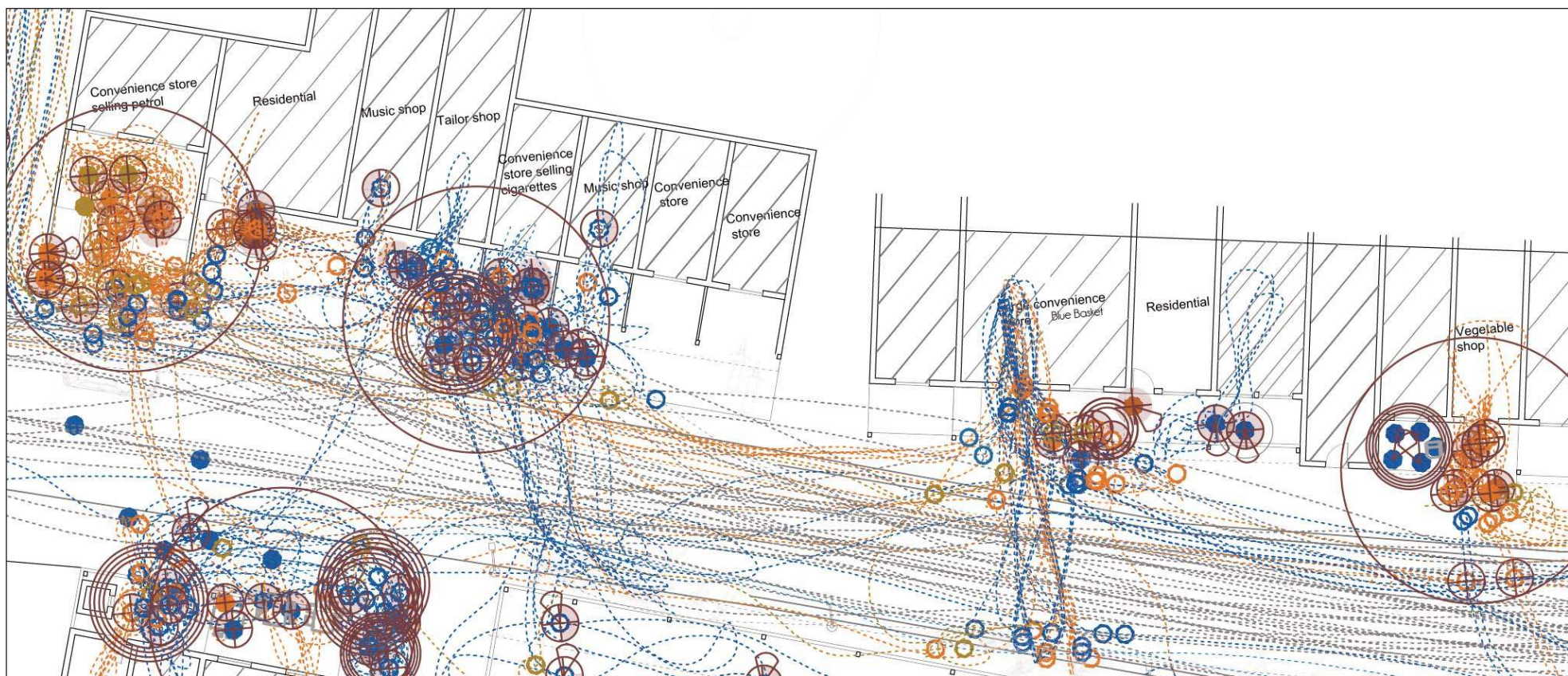
Aurelio points out that Svaram, besides being inspired and embedded in the integral paradigm, is also on the cutting edge of explorations and research on music and its harmonizing potential, of sound and consciousness studies. "We are on the pioneering edge of a growing global network of new and evolutionary resonances and that's really interesting; it's dynamic and fulfilling. This might be one of the keys to our success. But it is also due to the amazing industriousness and inventiveness of the people and artisans from the local villages. Without them there is no Svaram, and I would still be in my ivory tower, theorising and researching this stuff. They grounded it, they anchored it."

In conversation with Alan

For more information visit <https://svaram.org>

The relevance of urban design for Auroville

In February, the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture hosted a double exhibition: Bhavyo's paintings of the icy peaks of the Himalayan Tosh valley were displayed in its main room, while a number of urban design studies of his twin sister Bhavya were hung around the courtyard. Auroville Today asked Bhavya about her path and her views on Auroville's city development.



Mapping has the potential to capture complex spatial patterns and reveal them in very descriptive visual ways. The maps presented here are an analysis of the movement and pause patterns of women and men on a section of the Kuilapalayam main road. The map with circles shows how much more women walk as compared to men (big orange circles versus small blue circles), suggesting that urban design in this location needs to focus on women's needs and patterns as they are the pedestrians on the street. Women are seen to stop in Kuilapalayam for grocery shopping and other household chores whereas men enjoy chatting, tea and leisure time on the street. They show how women and men experience the same space in starkly different ways.

Auroville Today: Bhavya, when did you join Auroville?

Bhavya: My parents joined Auroville when my brother and I were 8 years old. We kids transitioned from an extremely strict government school in Gujarat to the freedom of Deepanam primary school. It took us a while to get from full Gujarati to full English, and there was a bit of a culture shock, but that paled into insignificance because of the joy of coming here. Bhavyo later studied at Last School, while I did my O and A levels in Future School. Bhavyo went on to become an artist. I took a gap year to figure out what I wanted to do in life.

In that year I interacted with many architects and took a lot of courses. But I found no interest in architecture. Instead, city development started to fascinate me. One of Auroville's architects guided me to the CEPT University in Ahmadabad where she and a few other Auroville architects had studied. The university's focus is on understanding, planning and designing human habitats. Its Faculty of Planning offered a five year Bachelor's in Urban Design. I applied, was accepted and I received a 50% scholarship. I got a loan of Rs 350,000 from the Auroville Scholarship Fund and relied on family and friends to meet the remaining needs. My mother in particular has been fantastic. She saved every penny she could during the five years I have been studying and sacrificed her own and my brother's comfort to help me pay for my studies. I graduated last year with a Bachelor's degree in Urban Design.

What is the difference between urban planning and urban design?

Urban planning is very large scale and goes top down; planners are looking at the entire city in its full form, at different layers. Urban design acts like a bridge between the small scale of architecture and the large scale of urban planning and aims at providing livable habitats to the residents. Urban planning doesn't concern itself with the design of public spaces. Urban designers do: after analyzing the urban environment and looking at how the urban space will be experienced by those who use it, they will design the space. In urban planning the human is invisible; in architecture it is all about the individual human; an urban designer builds bridges between them, working with urban planners and architects.

The exhibition showed three of your urban design projects: at Milan, at Ahmadabad and at Kuilapalayam. Do these projects have relevance for Auroville?

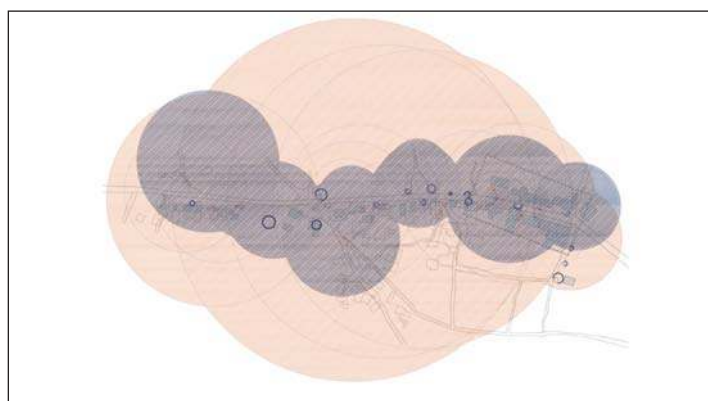
They do. In the Milan project we were looking at the 15-minute city, a concept that was invented by a Parisian planner who found that urban citizens should have access to their everyday essentials within a 15-minute walk from their home. In Ahmadabad, a UNESCO World Heritage city, we looked at the heritage neighbourhood and at the wishes of the people living there versus the government's plans to make the area a tourist attraction. The problems there are very similar to Auroville. The Kuilapalayam study focused on its main road. For a few days I observed what was going on and I spoke to shopkeepers and clients. This resulted in a dense and multi-layered data map which any urban designer who wants to plan the development of that road will need. A similar work will need to be done for Auroville.

Your thesis focused on the experience of urban design. What are your expectations of getting this incorporated in the planning and development work of Auroville?



Bhavya

On my return to Auroville, I joined the new Dreamweaving team. As a part of this team, I also met the Auroville Town Development Council constituted by the Governing Board, not as a note taker but as a full participant. The discussions all focused on materializing aspects of the Auroville Universal Township Master Plan (Perspective 2025). But I am left with many questions. The perspective plan is on 'a zoom-out' scale, without any sense of the experiential, nor of urban design. There are no humans in it and there is hardly mention of the area in which Auroville is situated. The plan is extremely basic. In my honest opinion, it



lacks creativity and it lacks uniqueness; more importantly, I find that the beautiful vision enshrined in the galaxy concept is completely lost. This defect should have been redressed in the Detailed Development Plans, as prescribed in the Master Plan, but these were never made, with the exception of the concept plan for sectors I and II of the Residential Zone made by some visiting town planners [see AVToday # 308, March 2015, eds] and also by the 2017 ATDC. But none of these attempts reached larger community discussions.

How do you think this could be rectified?

We need a new Master Plan, something that was also foreseen in this Perspective Plan, which has the year 2025 as an end date. And we have to look again at the qualifications and experience of those who are entrusted with planning and urban design. Apart from B.V. Doshi, who was Chairman of the TDC when he was a member of the Governing Board and who had his own town planning office, almost none of the TDC members have a town planning or urban design background. Most of them are architects, and they are wired differently. But planning the city is a very important job. Those who are empowered to do this particular work have the responsibility to do it well and must realize what a single line on a map can entail. For example, the perfect circle of the Crown has created a lot of communal disharmony which has not healed. More disharmony can be expected if they want to manifest the Outer Ring Road, as this affects neighbouring villages. The new Master Plan should therefore consider the needs and expectations of the residents as well as those of the surrounding villages. For it is obvious that Auroville can no longer be planned in isolation. Planners and urban designers have to focus on finding a balance between foreseeing what the city and its neighbouring villages truly need, and what that entails in terms of buildings, roads and mobility, and how the users will experience urban spaces. The new plan will need to specify the broad concepts and guidelines, its urban design and the relationship between public and private spaces.

You mention the needs of the villagers. How do you see their interests being incorporated?

First of all, the planners will have to realize that they cannot plan as if there is no existing development. There is no blank paper on which they can draw lines and map buildings. This is the challenge of all Indian cities. Added to that is a speed of development that nobody can control or predict. Auroville is the reason that the three villages that immediately surround Auroville are growing at such an exponential pace – a pace that will only increase in proportion to Auroville's development. At present, thousands of these villagers are finding employment in Auroville. That number will only increase. So we can't say that we don't care about our immediate environment; that we don't care about the fact that all the traffic for Auroville goes through these villages. That would be tantamount to a coloniser's perspective.

Second, we need to realise that collaborative planning, which includes the villagers, is markedly different from telling them that we in Auroville have all the expertise and they should listen to us. We need to interact with them, involve them in our discussions and get their views on our plans. We need to start looking at an integrated development, at a collective development of Auroville with the immediate region. If Auroville wants to be a model for India, this will be an essential step. For this is the problem that faces planners all over India: the position of those in power versus those who do not have the same power. Auroville's situation is not unique. We have the money, we have the government support, we have the power to do things on the ground. So how can we responsibly use that power? There is a wealth of expertise in Auroville and I am convinced that we can come up with solutions. I was part of Dreamweaving in 20-22, and could already see solutions coming up. Sure, they were in a very conceptual state, but that's where it all begins.

You mentioned that the villagers need to participate in planning of buildings. Can you give an example?

Plans have been cooking to start building the largest Line of Force, which has a highest elevation of 18 stories near Edaiyanchavadi village and then tapers down to two or three floors near the Matrimandir Lake.

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The urban design relevance for Auroville

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The maximum building height in Edaiyanchavadi is ground floor plus two. What impression does Auroville create if it has an 18-story luxurious building coming up next to a village where many people still live in squalid circumstances, and with a barbed wire fence in between as approved by the Governing Board? For me, it doesn't make sense, at least not at the present time.

What are your views on the Auroville road network for which forested areas have now been cleared?

In the early days there was a concept that Auroville would not have cars. Private cars would be parked outside the greenbelt area and a shuttle service would bring people into the city. I think this concept is outdated, as is shown in the building of the Crown Road and the large parking area opposite the Solar Kitchen. Auroville has become a huge magnet for people – visitors, tourists, experts, volunteers, guests, us – each of whom needs transport. Apart from the shuttle that brings people from the Visitors' Centre to the Matrimandir viewing area, Auroville does not have public transport for its guests.

So there is a need for the Crown Road, but we should evaluate which parts of the Crown are going to serve who. I do not think that busloads of people should use the Solar Kitchen to Arka stretch; that's Residential Zone and is meant for residents and for those who are employed in Auroville or need to service Auroville. But for the public to reach the new Sound Garden in the Industrial Zone, the Crown Road from the Visitors' Centre to the Sound Garden

would need to be used. So a lot of deep thinking on the use and width of the roads and on the design of the public urban spaces along those roads will be required.

Can you clarify this?

If you look at the Solar Kitchen – Library – Humanscapes area, you will see that the buildings have been set back from the Crown Road at different distances. The library is set back by 15 metres, Kalpana by 7 or 8 meters while the Solar Kitchen practically borders the Road. That has created a rather ugly wide area where nothing is happening.

The architects of Kalpana made a good attempt to connect the buildings to the road with a pergola and outside benches, and they also created a kind of pedestrian walkway. But this is now lost because of the way the Crown Road has been constructed with a one metre height difference between the road and the buildings, and the cutting of all the trees. The loss of shade and the use of the roadside for car parking makes the road unattractive for pedestrians. The Crown needs shaded walkways along it, where people can walk, where cyclists can ride. That's the work of an urban designer.

Do you see an intensification of the urban context of Auroville?

Dramatically so. The envisaged physical characteristics of Auroville are super-high density, lots of buildings, many roads; and the social-cultural aspects are cosmopolitan, with many things happening all the time. Already now it's difficult to keep track of everything that's going on, the cultural events, the workshops etc. I guess we could easily

build five more amphitheatres, and have them all well-used. The challenge is how the physical manifestation of Auroville will respond to all that. We need to build urban spaces for things to happen, in collaboration with those who will be using them.

How do you, as a 24-year old, experience the present urban and economic context of Auroville?

I would say 'dismal'. At my age, I like to hang out with friends at a nice place in the evening and enjoy some simple food. Such a place is not available in the city area. We are forced to go to eateries that are not part of Auroville, as they remain open late at night and are for us affordable. The Auroville eateries close at 8 pm and have far too high food and drink prices. To pay 150 rupees for a cup of coffee is really a lot if you try to live on a maintenance of only Rs 20,000 a month. Why can't Auroville have nice eateries all over the city with minimal charges, which serve our needs? Can't we have 'youth cards' offering a discount or 'in kind' benefits? There is a general discontent; young people have many different aspirations, and Auroville doesn't properly cater to any of them. This may result in young people leaving Auroville as they do not earn enough to cover their daily needs or if they want to travel, open their own units or activities, or start a family.

Then how do you envisage your own future? In Auroville, or elsewhere?

There is a positive as well as a negative side. On the positive side I am grateful that I can freely approach and talk with the older generation, learn from their wealth of experience and enjoy a deep and soulful conversation. On behalf of

Dreamweaving I have been talking to the top architects and planners in India, something I would never have been allowed to do if I had been working in a planning office as a 24-year old fresh graduate. In the span of the past six months I have gained a tremendous amount of experience. In this context, Auroville is beyond amazing, and that makes me thankful that I am here.

But I have also seen many blockages that have developed: "The city should only be like this and not like that." I've got the impression that many old-timers have walled themselves up, leaving very few holes through which new ideas can enter. It's different for young people. I am now working with three young architects who happened to come to Auroville and who stayed because something here spoke to them deeply. Those are the people who are open to change and who have the necessary skills for what Auroville needs to become. One of them has started his own architecture office; like him, I would like to start my own urban design studio one day.

But I have to be realistic and look at my financial situation. There is no way I will be able to repay the Rs 350,000 study loan if I remain in Auroville, living on the basic maintenance of Rs 20,000 a month. I will need to go out and earn a decent income, the more so if I want to have my own house or apartment in Auroville, start a family and open my own urban design studio. Moreover, I would like to continue my education and pursue a Masters or even a Ph.D. in Urban Studies. I have given myself two years to get a deeper understanding of what I can do for Auroville and what I need to do to become self-supporting.

In conversation with Carel

YOUTH SURVEY

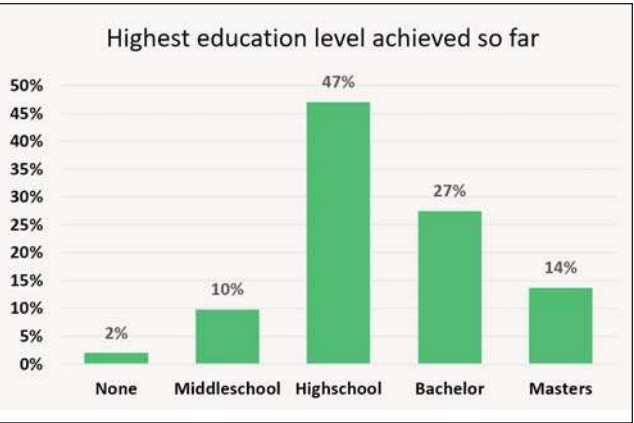
A snapshot of our working youth: a YouthLink survey

In early 2023, YouthLink conducted an initial survey on the working situation of Aurovilian youth aged 18-30. 116 youth (24% of the total 492 Aurovilians in this age bracket) chose to participate. Of these, 51 respondents (10%) agreed to participate in a more in-depth survey, which took place in July and August 2023. This group was largely representative of all Auroville youth in terms of age, gender, and nationality, with one notable exception: no Indian females aged 18-21 participated in the second part of the survey.

The survey analysis provides insights into the education, work and financial situations, and perspectives on Auroville of the community's youth. This phase in the respondents' lives appears quite fluid. In the seven month period between the first and second part of this survey, 35% of respondents shifted between academic studies, looking for work, working, or place of work. The group was also highly diverse in terms of lived experience, goals and perspectives.

Summary overview

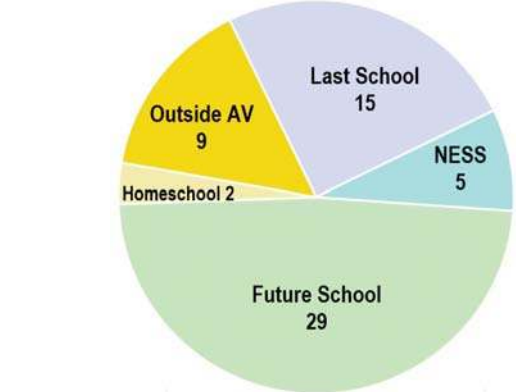
88% of respondents had completed high school and 35% had attained a bachelor's or master's degree. Seven respondents were enrolled in higher studies at the time of the survey. The analysis noted that education levels among respondents was "much above average" and further noted the likelihood that some respondents, given their age, would seek a higher degree in the future.



Break-up of respondents by high school education. Several respondents attended multiple high schools, so 51 individuals yielded 60 answers.

Respondents had different experiences and perspectives about their education which seemed to correlate to the differences in the offerings and approaches of the different Auroville high schools. Youth who had attended Future School remarked that they felt well-prepared for further studies; those who attended Last School remarked that the school had a holistic approach and expressed their satisfaction with this education. Despite some respondents feeling inadequately prepared for the next phase of their lives, most cited positive impacts, such as skills for how to learn and grow, how to interact with people, how to be proactive and how to develop self discipline. Areas for further training or coaching interest include administrative skills, financial management, interpersonal communication, practical skills, crafts and arts.

Of the 51 respondents, 36 were working and 8 were looking for work. Of those with work, 28 worked in Auroville; 6 of these had



established a commercial unit within Auroville. Respondents reported a wide range of weekly working hours, but a majority were working 30-40 hours per week. 31% of respondents were executives and worked longer hours. A significant number of respondents were also engaged in caretaking responsibilities and unpaid volunteer work, in addition to their primary employment.

Most youth working in Auroville reported earning the equivalent of a monthly 'maintenance'. Those who worked outside Auroville reported earning at least 50% more per month. There was no obvious correlation between earnings and gender, nationality or type of workplace. Nearly half of respondents indicated their income fell short of their regular expenses.

Most respondents expressed positive sentiments about Auroville, particularly with reference to meaningful work and opportunities for learning and growth. However, a significant portion of respondents considered their low earning potential when compared with outside opportunities a major concern and a possible reason to leave Auroville in the future. The majority reported that the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had an influence on their lives. How they felt and expressed this impact was highly diverse and individualised.

What follows are specific highlights from the detailed analysis.

School influence on working

About 16% of the respondents were currently looking for work, almost equally divided between Future and Last School alumni. Of the 7 respondents who were currently studying, 6 graduated from Future School and 1 from NESS.

It was notable that all working respondents who graduated from NESS were working in an Auroville service unit. The 4 respondents involved in performance and arts work were all Last School alumni.

How respondents' education prepared them for their current situation

Respondents were asked an open question, which resulted in a diverse set of answers. 18% (spread over alumni from all schools) reported that their education did not prepare them well for their current situation. 20% highlighted that high school provided a foundation for further studies. The remaining 34 each mentioned several positive outcomes covering a range of specific knowledge and skills.

What else respondents would have liked to learn in school

8 respondents explicitly stated they had learned everything they wanted to in school. 4 respondents admitted that in hindsight they could have learned more from what was offered.

40 respondents named a total of more than 60 different subjects that they would have liked to learn at school.

- ❖ (12 respondents, 30%) Practical skills: from basic skills of home maintenance, building and repair, like plumbing, electrical, mechanical work, or using carpentry tools, to crafts and arts.
- ❖ (11, 28%) Many wishes centered around some kind of life coaching: how to find out what one is good at / likes to do; how to deal with adverse situations or feeling lost; how to learn from failure; social skills about communal living, gender norms, safety, consent and awareness; sexual education; how to find a balance between study/work and fun; self growth, confidence and how to live a more conscious life.
- ❖ (10, 25%) Managing finances: understanding taxes / salaries; how to file taxes; how to save and invest; how to open a bank account; how to get health insurance; understanding economics and how money works; basic accounting.
- ❖ (9, 23%) Administrative skills: writing formal emails and documents; basic or more advanced computer skills; software/online tools for creating documents, spreadsheets, posters and presentations.
- ❖ (8, 20%) Some respondents asked explicitly to learn more about Auroville: the history, governance, and how different aspects work; more about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.
- ❖ (7, 18%) Interpersonal communication skills: range of responses from dealing with people in different situations to essay writing and presentations to wider audiences.
- ❖ (5, 13%) Practical job search / job creation skills: how to identify job openings; how to apply for a job, including writing a CV and an application letter; entrepreneurship basics.

The answer patterns varied depending on the high school the respondents had attended. Future School students graduate with internationally recognised certification. These alumni felt they were well prepared for further studies and had learned self discipline and time management. Some would have liked to learn more practical skills, how to deal with life situations, how to find or create a job, and more about Sri Aurobindo and Auroville.

Last School aims to focus on integral education and does not offer official certification. More than half the Last School alumni said that they had learned everything they wanted at school and that they had learned determination, persistence, and how to deal with many situations in life; others mentioned that their schooling had given them a love for learning and self development. Unlike respondents from other schools, Last School alumni did not mention a lack of knowledge about Sri Aurobindo or Auroville; or a lack of practical or job search skills.

Work Situation in 2023

The in-depth interviews helped shed light on various aspects of youth employment, including the types of work, working hours, job-finding methods, team roles, training opportunities, and the factors that shape work-related preferences. The data gathered offered insights into the employment landscape within Auroville and how it compares to opportunities outside the community.

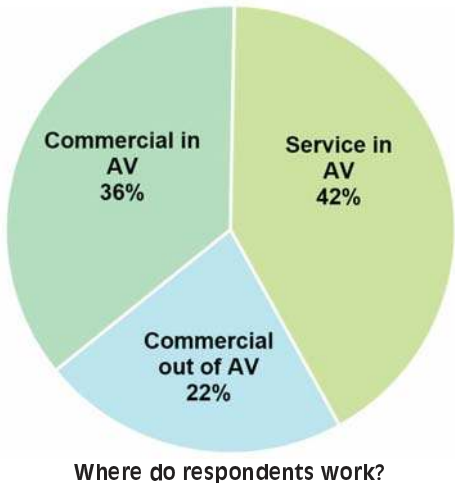
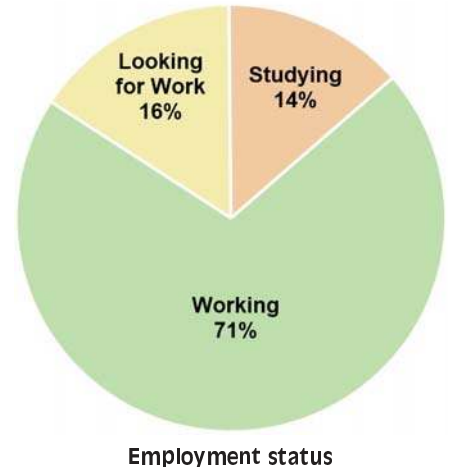
Employment Status

Among the 36 respondents (71%) who were actively employed, 42% were working in service units within Auroville, 36% in commercial units within Auroville, and 22% in commercial companies outside Auroville. Notably, 6 of the 13 working in Auroville's commercial units had established the unit where they worked.

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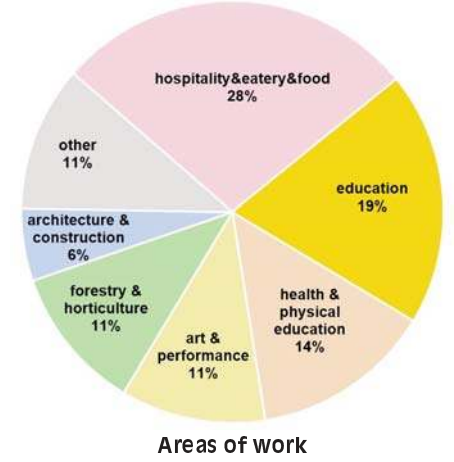
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In Part 1 of this survey, the distribution was similar for the 116 respondents. In both study samples, employed respondents had worked at their current workplace for 2 years on average. Most respondents had worked in several places.



Areas of work

Many were working in the area of hospitality / eatery / food (28%), followed by education (19%) / health / physical education (14%). Some were working in art / performance (11%), forestry / horticulture (11%) and architecture / construction (6%). Categorisation was not



always easy as a number of youth were working in more than one place.

How they found their job

Nearly half of the respondents (45%) had found employment through friend or family connections. 18% were self-employed or created a new Auroville unit. Internships, volunteering, and cold applications were also commonly cited. Only 2 respondents had found employment through Auroville HR Hub or Auroville web



Team roles and work hours

announcements.

Hours of work

Respondents worked from 10 to 60 hours per week, with most working between 30 and 40

hours, no matter where they were employed. On average, respondents in commercial companies outside Auroville were working 36.8 hours per week; those in commercial Auroville units were working 44 hours per week; the self-employed were working 38 hours per week; and those in Auroville service units were working 35.5 hours per week.

33% of respondents said they wished to reduce their work hours, 44% were content with their current hours, and 17% aimed to increase their work hours. Those who wanted to work more were driven by a passion for their work, while those who sought reduced hours cited a desire for better work-life balance, time for family, education, and other activities.

For work in Auroville, female respondents were working 32% fewer hours than male respondents; Indian respondents were working 40% more hours than non-Indian; Executives were working 67% more work hours than non-executives; respondents in service units were working 7% fewer hours than those in commercial units.

The survey also asked about unpaid work. 13 (36%) of the respondents had caretaking work for parents, children or relatives, ranging from a few hours to 50 hours a week, with an average of 15 hours. Additionally, 15 respondents (42%) engaged in unpaid volunteer work ranging from 1 to 20 hours per week, averaging 8.5 hours per week.

Workplace training

The majority (65%) reported that they received on-the-job training, with 38% exclusively relying on this form of education. Six respondents (18%) received an introductory course to their current work, while 8 others (24%) attended internal or external workshops or courses.

The financial situation of Auroville youth

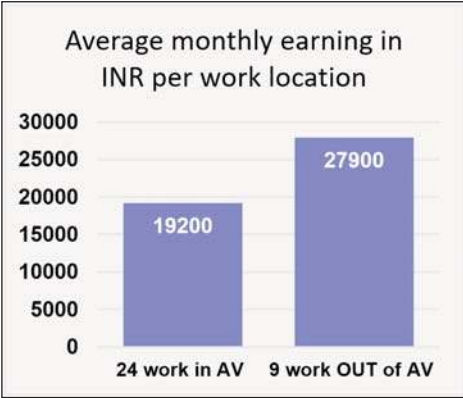
Many respondents earn about INR 20,000 per month. Nearly as many report that they earn INR 30,000 or more.

Big differences result also from the fact that some respondents were working outside Auroville (in India or abroad) and some worked only part time.

Respondents who worked outside of Auroville earned 45% more on average. But in the analysis, it is noted that the real average is much higher since the survey scale was inadequate to accurately reflect the financial situation of youth working in other countries.

Income insufficiencies

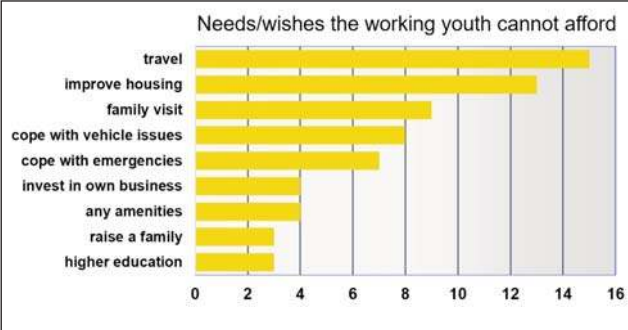
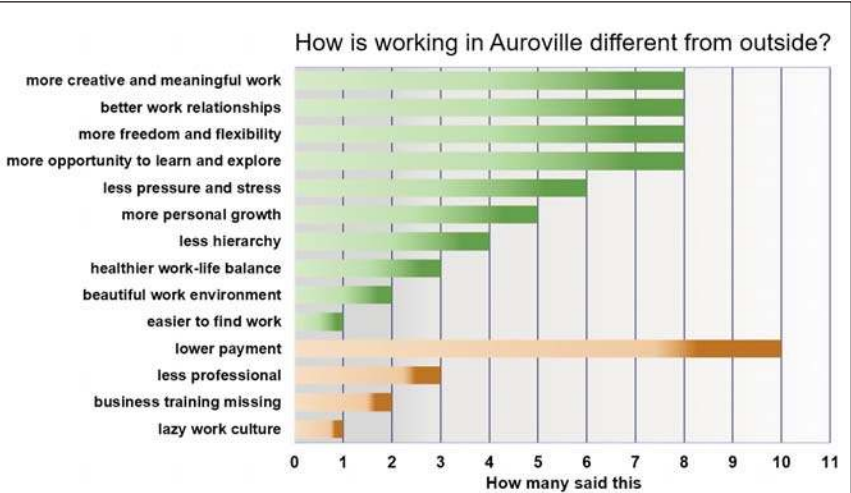
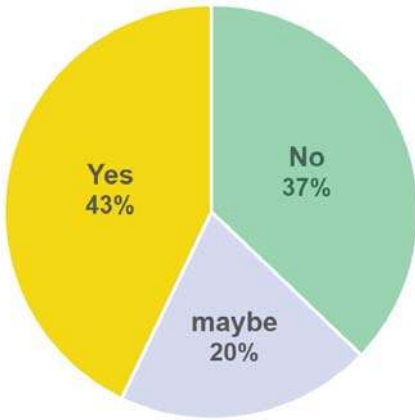
19 participants (53%) reported that their current income meets their daily needs. 17 respondents (47%) indicated that their income falls short of covering their expenses and further indicated that they sought support from a partner, friends or family; engaged in work outside of Auroville (seasonal, abroad, online, freelance); relied on savings; adjusted their lifestyles; and/or utilised credit lines to bridge that gap. Gender and nationality did not seem to correlate with income satisfaction.



Of the 10 youth working outside Auroville, only 1 said that his income is not sufficient for daily living needs.

The largest unfulfilled wishes concerned money for travelling (44%) and improving their housing situation (38%). Many respondents expressed challenges meeting fundamental needs such as visiting family (26%) and raising a family (9%). Some said they could not afford to pay for higher education (9%) or to invest in their own business (12%).

Is low payment a reason to leave Auroville?



Condensed and adapted from Auroville Youth Work Survey 2023 - Part 2 by YouthLink

The full report is available at <https://www.youthlink.org.in/post/auroville-youth-work-survey-2023-part-2>.

FESTIVALS

AUM Festival



This year's AUM (Auroville Underground Music) Festival, organised by Youth Center, YouthLink and Svaram on March 16 and 17, featured two days of live music and performances by artists from in and around Auroville. There were drum circles, dance performances, a fire show, a bubble show, soundscapes and more. Activities included a flute making workshop for children and an instrument circle where participants played upcycled instruments created from waste materials found around the Youth Center. Musicians who participated in the festival were encouraged to play their own original songs and to use the space as a platform to fearlessly express themselves without the external pressure of excellence.

AUM is an annual festival started in 2018 with the intention of creating a space where people would come together in music and in play to reconnect with the sounds and vibrations all around. We are often not aware how these influence us, often not aware of the sounds themselves - the fan in the office, the birds in the garden, the rumbling of motors, or perhaps even the sound of air flowing in and out of our lungs.

According to modern vibration theory, every particle in the universe is made up of vibrating strings of energy. The festival name - a phonetic play on OM - signifies the primordial sound from which the universe was created.

Namu



PHOTOS COURTESY YOUTHLINK

A tapestry of tradition, creativity and learning: the enchantment of the Endangered Craft Mela

In the heart of Auroville’s The Learning Community’s (TLC) base camp, where the gentle whispers of the wind were rustling along with the vibrant hum of creativity, a humble spectacle unfolded during the sacred week of Auroville’s Birthday. From the 21st to the 27th of February, the fifth edition of the Endangered Craft Mela (ECM) unfolded with its kaleidoscope of patterns, materials, colours and sounds. The theme for this year’s ECM was insects, or ‘poochis’, as they are locally called.



Wood carving

At its core, the craft week served as an annual gathering—a fun-filled journey into the heart of tradition, innovation, and boundless imagination. It was a journey guided by the gentle hands of artisans and craftsmen, who shared not just their skills, but their stories, their heritage, and their passion for preserving the crafts and arts that have shaped their lives. The craft week is an immersive experiential learning week for young children from Auroville and the bioregion schools.

The air at TLC crackled with anticipation as children with their bright eyes filled with excitement arrived in school buses or by cycles. They greet each other to gather around the myriad workshops that dotted the base camp, eager to immerse themselves in the world of craftsmanship that awaited them. The crafts range from traditional practices that have been passed down from their ancestors, like three generations of



Palm leaf weaving

women from a tribal hamlet called Sitling, whose embroidery is as intricate as their rooting in their ancestral traditions, to those who learnt on their own and wanted to share their craft, such as Upcycling Studio.

The core idea has been to inspire and educate the next generation by providing a precious learning space for traditional, endangered and local craftsmanship. ECM provided a fun and safe learning environment for children to learn crafts that from amongst the many options that were made available to them. The mix of traditional crafts included kalamkari, embroidery,

stone carving, coconut fibre rope making, leather work, metal casting, basket weaving with natural materials like banana fibre, palmyra, bamboo etc, wood carving, soapstone carving, cotton rope making, clay creations, blacksmithing, lathe work, sewing, and carpentry, along with local handmade crafts like making candles, paper, puppets, crochet, beadwork, murals, making peanut butter while cycling, upcycling, and fun activities like T-shirt printing.

TLC was abuzz the whole week, with craftspeople in their element teaching to close to 200 children in small batches, very patiently, with curiosity, inquiry, many a smile and multiple little conversations laced into what the little hands were creating. “It is amazing to see the focus, curiosity and fun the kids are having. No child has complained that they were bored or wanted to play”, said one of the facilitators.

While playing a small yet significant part in sharing knowledge and opening doors to creative explorations, the core group has been working towards supporting the crafts and arts in its own way, by creating possibilities to be



Candle making

inspired by each other’s crafts and to integrate them even further. One such advance that unfolded this year at the ECM was making floor mats from the coconut fibre ropes that were made using knots and patterns.

ECM draws its inspiration from the Craft Week at Marudam Farm School in Tiruvannamalai and has added flavours of its own over the last five editions.

One could feel a constant sense of deep holding by the adults present on campus, be it the core team, the craftspeople, or the many volunteers who worked tirelessly to set up the space, draw signs by hand, and figure the many logistics required when over thirty crafts are to be taught to close to two hundred children from various backgrounds.

As the sun began to set, the participants and craftspeople were invited to join an evening programme. Featuring traditional performing arts, including theatre, music, and martial arts, captivating the audience and immersing them in the rich tapestry of



Showing a basket

culture of Tamil Nadu and India, it was called “Kalairangam” (stage for arts). The first evening showcased Therukkoothu, an ancient and indigenous form of storytelling that has been performed for many generations in this part of Tamil Nadu.

The next night, it was Thorpaavaikoothuand. Selvaraj and his family, among the last artists in the world to practice and perform this Thanjavur-based shadow puppet theatre style, had the whole audience glued to the shadow images that danced, fought, teased and laughed. It was a feast for the eyes and soul.

Yatra Kalaikkuzhu from Kulapalayam, pre-sented a street play called Paadam (‘Lesson’), written and directed by Yatra Srinivasan and presented by the Yatra Theatre team. This humorous play, set in a classroom which looked and felt chaotic, had a beautiful message about conservation and waste management. The drama that unfolded between the students and teacher in the play made everyone laugh, for language was not a barrier. On the 24th of February, MaiyaKalaikkuzha, a team of folk artists from Chennai brought ancient Tamizh forms of



T-shirt printing

percussion and drumming to focus on social issues such as gender and caste. It was hard not to move or be moved by this traditional performance of rhythmic movement and percussion.

For the final evening of Kalairangam, Chennai Kalaikkuzhu, an amateur theatre group with a prolific record of serious political theatre activity in Tamil Nadu, presented two plays: Pattangil Ullapadi and NalVazhi. The focus was on the violence and atrocities faced by indigenous



Basket making.

and scheduled communities who are excluded from participation in social spaces and activities. This touched upon deeply engrained social undercurrents.

The final day of the ECM was the “Mela / Fair Day” for children to display everything they had created. It was also a day when the craftspeople had stalls and the community could get their hands on precious local handmade goodies directly from the artisans. The day was filled with mixed emotions: the joy of sharing and the knowledge that tomorrow would be different. “This is one of my favourite weeks. I look forward to coming here every year and spending time with children”, said one of the artisans as we shared a goodbye hug.



Mela Fair Day

As all of us process the buzz of the ECM week, one can’t help but realise how learning spaces such as this may be a pathway for more such initiatives and explorations of the different ways we learn.

Deepthi Indikuri



A Therukkoothu actor



A Silambam practitioner from Mamallan Silambatta Kalaikkuzhu, Puducherry



Members of the Parayattu group performing

Small wins, big dreams

Auroville Village Action's Women's Day inspires inclusion

Imagine a scene bursting with vibrant energy, a gathering of over 500 women and 50 children, all united by a common goal. This wasn't a bustling marketplace, but Auroville Village Action's (AVAG's) heartwarming International Women's Day celebration. This year's theme, "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress," struck a chord, and AVAG's initiative, "Inspire Inclusion," flourished into a truly remarkable event.

Similar to a tiny seed tendered for growth, Women's Day celebration aimed to nurture the potential within every woman. By weaving young girls, boys and men, ages 25 to 65, into the cultural fabric of the event, they dismantled traditional gender norms in the process.

Ten-year-old Anjali, initially shy, transformed into a confident storyteller as she narrated a play about the importance of girls' education. Her grandfather, now a proud audience member, later confided that he'd never considered sending Anjali to school before. This simple act of inclusion sparked a potential change within a family.



The dramas weren't sugar-coated presentations. They tackled difficult realities – child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and discrimination – but with a message of hope and empowerment. A powerful skit depicted a young woman bravely confronting an abusive husband. The audience held its breath, then erupted in thunderous applause as the woman walked away with newfound strength.

Conversations crackled with energy afterwards, friends shared knowing glances, and a sense of solidarity filled the room. Many women confided in organisers about their own experiences, seeking support and guidance.

For many women, this event was a transformative experience. New women's groups, some experiencing their first public performance, courageously stepped out of their comfort zones and showcased their talents. A group of women from a remote village, initially hesitant, presented a vibrant folk dance that ignited the crowd. One member, Lakshmi, who had always been reluctant to speak up, later shared, "This is the first time I've felt truly seen and heard. We're going to practise even harder for next year!"

This sentiment echoed throughout the day. Even seasoned members of older women's groups, some active for over 16 years, confessed to feeling a newfound confidence after participating. The room buzzed with a contagious energy of inclusivity and empowerment. It was a space where

women could be themselves, connect with others who understood their struggles, and forge a strong sense of belonging.

The high attendance and enthusiastic participation spoke volumes about the event's success. Women arrived early, eager to delve into workshops on financial literacy and women's rights. They remained engaged throughout the day,



PHOTOS COURTESY AUROVILLE VILLAGE ACTION

sharing stories, laughter, and a new-found sense of purpose. As a new staff member from a neighbouring village remarked, "This is an unforgettable day for me. I never expected to witness such a powerful transformation! I can see the change burning bright in these women's eyes."

AVAG's Women's Day celebration wasn't a fleeting moment; it was a seed sown for lasting progress. By investing in women, fostering inclusion, and providing a platform for their voices, AVAG is accelerating progress not just for these women, but for the entire ecosystem of their communities. Imagine the ripple effect as these empowered women return home, ready to advocate for their daughters, educate their families, and build a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

Nadia Akcadurak

ON A LIGHTER NOTE

I'm not the most observant of mortals, but even I have noticed, over the past couple of years, that two different worlds have been forming in Auroville. Each has its own groups, its own meetings and conferences, its own media outlets. Each has its own understanding of the Foundation Act and its own version of what Mother wanted for Auroville, and it uses this to construct its narratives and justify its actions.

(Of course, generally Aurovilians don't like to think of themselves as being members of distinct 'groups'. They prefer to think of themselves as individuals standing for certain ideals who happen to be aligned with others of the same perspective. But those with shared orientations do develop shared narratives etc. which begin to identify them, in other's eyes at least, as a 'group'. And there is nothing wrong in belonging to or being identified with a group. In fact, a group fulfils a basic human need, which is to want to be with people who think and act like you do.)

At present, there seems to be no exchange, no communication, between these different groupings, these different worlds. They seem impermeable to each other and to operate as parallel yet opposed universes.

The problem, as I see it, is that this separation doesn't go far enough.

A modest proposal

Let me explain. Let's say you are enjoying a pleasant walk in the forest. Suddenly, you see coming towards you someone whose allegiance you are not sure about. Is he a 'floater'? Does he belong to the other group? Or is he one of yours? Given so many unknowns, if he smiles at you, do you smile back? If he tries to engage you in conversation, what do you talk about? Which topics must you at all costs avoid?

Or you meet someone who is plainly from the other group. What do you do? Turn aside into the bushes? Too late, she's already seen you. What to do then? Turn around, walk away? But this could look like cowardice or defeat. Keep walking then, but ignore her? But what if she's doing the same thing, and you collide? Or do you give her a disdainful look as you pass, implying that you recognize an asura when you see one?

It's damn difficult to deal with these moments when these different universes are brought into abrupt juxtaposition.

The solution is obvious, and I really don't know why somebody has not thought of it before. We need to construct Auroville in such a way that the members of the two groups never have to

meet each other again, and never have to consider any other views but their own. How? Well, each group will have not only its own meeting places (a promising beginning has already been made here) but also its own housing, shops, health facilities, songs, art, rituals, perhaps even its own dress code, and, of course, its own footpaths and roads because otherwise there would be a danger of meeting someone from the other group on a common road. (Of course, we won't create another Matrimandir or Amphitheatre as yet but each group will be given different times to visit.)

Granted, this duplication may not seem to be the most efficient use of resources (although, apparently, we can never have too many roads). But given this desire for separation it would provide the necessary impetus to build the city quickly – which seems to be the most important consideration at the moment.

But what about those who don't want to be part of either group, who want to inhabit what they term the 'middle ground'? Well, clearly, they should form another group and create their own facilities, too. For today we can forget all the airy-fairy talk about collaboration and togetherness. Apparently, at present separation is the only thing which will make everybody happy.

Or have I missed something?

Alan

PASSINGS

Josette Tardivel

Josette, who had been living in Surrender community, passed away on March 17th. She had recently celebrated her 80th birthday, and had been suffering from cancer.

In the early days of Auroville, Josette worked at the Visa Service, then located at Bharat Nivas, using handwritten cards to store residents' passport and visa data. She later continued working there maintaining the Master List of all residents.

Josette also participated in theater plays put up at Aspiration by Croquette, such as Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire*.

Josette's remains were buried on March 21st at the Auroville Burial Grounds.



Christel Quévieux

Christel left her body on March 21st at the age of 55.

For the past 30 years, in spite of her handicap which forced her to be in a wheelchair, she kept coming to Auroville and made it her second home.

This year, during her stay, she was suffering from respiratory problems, which worsened on the return flight to France. Unfortunately, she could not reach home and she passed away in a hospital in Frankfurt, Germany where she had been admitted.



Lorraine Freeman

Lorraine passed away on March 25th, at the age of 76 at Mahalakshmi home where she had been living for the last years.

Lorraine hailed from the United States, where she had worked as a nurse. She was a passionate and strong willed advocate for animals and shortly after her arrival in 2007 in Auroville worked at the Integrated Animal Center. In 2013 she stepped back from animal care and over the following years she worked in Pour Tous Distribution Center and followed her interests in theater and comedy.

Lorraine's remains were buried on March 28th at the Auroville Burial Grounds.



Remembering The Mother’s first arrival in Pondicherry

On Friday, 29.3.2024, the date of The Mother’s first arrival in Pondicherry, there was a morning meditation and a silent evening gathering under the Banyan tree at Matrimandir. All Aurovilians were invited for a collective concentration to reaffirm together the purpose and spirit of Auroville.

High Court Madras judgement

On March 15, a bench of the Madras High Court consisting of its Hon’ble Chief Justice Mr. Sanjay V. Gangapurwala and the Hon’ble Mr.Justice D. Bharatha Chakravarthy struck down as ultra vires and illegal the Standing Order of the Governing Board (GB) whereby it had constituted the Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC) and subsequently had nominated its members. The bench judged that the Auroville Foundation Act (Act) entrusts the functions of formulating the Master Plan to the Residents’ Assembly (RA) and the final preparation and approval thereof to the GB. It also found that the Act does not authorise the GB to constitute committees that have no GB member as committee member. The bench found that the Standing Order enabling the GB or the Secretary to appoint ATDC members, without the nomination/selection emanating from the RA does not align with the Scheme of the Act, nor with the scheme laid out in the Auroville Master Plan. For the same reason the court also judged the constitution of the Advisory Group by the GB as ultra vires of the Act. The bench stated that with this order, the GB had arrogated the entire powers of the RA to itself and had virtually nullified its existence and role vis-à-vis the Master Plan. The bench, while setting aside the Standing Order, stated that it will be open for the GB to frame fresh regulations in tune with the provision of the Act and the observations made in the order of the bench.

Status of pending court cases

The cases challenging the Admission and Termination of Residents in the Register of Residents Regulations 2023 and the Selection of the Working Committee Regulations 2024 have been posted for another hearing on April 22nd. The appeal by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation on the Working Committee case (judgement given by Justice Quddhose in August 2022) was listed along with residual TDC matters. They weren’t heard due to lack of time and have been postponed to 10th of June after the High Court summer break. The Quo Warranto case was heard at length over two days on 27th and 28th March and the judgement is now awaited. A petition, filed by an Auroville resident, has asked the Court to order the Secretary to follow specified sections of the Auroville Foundation Rules, 1997 and the General Financial Rules of the Central Government, and to cancel all registrations of land exchanges since 2021 that have not followed these rules.

Update on the entry process

Further to the High Court ordered interim stay on the AVFO’s Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations 2023, [see AVToday 415, March 2024], the Auroville Entry Board selected by the Residents’ Assembly informed the community that it will not process new applications, but will continue to take care of existing Newcomer processes.

Exit Review Committee (ERC) update

The ERC, which has been meeting on a weekly basis since its formation in January 2024, reported that a positive and harmonious group dynamic has been established and that the group has focused on studying the Exit Review Policy which was drafted a few years ago but which was never approved by the RA. This policy is a refinement of the Auroville (Admission and Termination in the Register of Residents’ Regulations) 2020. That year, the community

process for the final ratification of the Exit Review Policy was interrupted by the Covid pandemic and the last steps of holding a General Meeting and a subsequent RAD on the subject could not be done. The ERC is now ready to move forward with the ratification process. It awaits the final judgement from the Madras High Court on the validity of the Auroville (Admission and Termination in the Register of Residents) Regulations 2023, which the Court had already stayed in February this year. A General Meeting on the subject will then be announced soon.

RA-WCom response to 66th GB meeting minutes

The Working Committee of the Residents’ Assembly (RA-Wcom) has sent an extensive response to the Governing Board and its Secretary regarding the content of the minutes of the 66th meeting of the Governing Board [see Avtoday # 415 page 3, February 2024, eds.] The majority of the comments focus on the Board’s authoritative decisions which have been taken without the mandatory consultation with the Residents’ Assembly as prescribed in the Auroville Foundation Act and the International Advisory Council.

Tenders

From the website <https://www.tenderdetail.com/Indian-ender/auroville-tenders> it became known that the Auroville Foundation Office has invited many tenders for carrying out various works. Amongst them are: doing a digital topographical survey for the area beyond the Outer Ring Road up to the Green Belt region and a complete layout for Auroville from the centre to the Green Belt; a tender for the execution of the balance portion of the Crown Road, including the provision of led street lighting; a tender for the construction of the Darkali bridge at the Crown Road; a tender for the construction of the Outer Ring Road from the secondary service node to the Visitor’s Centre Parking, including led street lighting; and the demarcation of service nodes and proposed building location as per layout. For full details visit the website.

Fruit trees auctioned

On March 9th the Auroville Foundation Office (AVFO) tendered and on March 27th auctioned the fruits of the fruits trees of the Auroville Farms, without any consultation with the RA. A late correction to the tender document specified that it is mandatory for successful tenderers to first offer/sell the fruits to Food Link “at no more than the prevailing market price”. While the Governing Board had previously emphasised Auroville’s need for food self-sustainability, Auroville farms will now lose one more of their sources of income, in addition to recent maintenance cuts and loss of productive farm land due to land exchanges. The Auroville Farm Group publicly decried the actions as “yet another blow to farming in Auroville” which will leave farms in a position where they can no longer sustain themselves. The Group noted the lack of communication from the Secretary’s Office, including a lack of intention to work with the farmers. The RA-WCom issued a public press notice to notify potential bidders that transactions about the lease of Auroville fruit trees might be subject to legal challenges, disputes and litigations.

S.O.S from AuroOrchard

In a letter to the Secretary requesting her help, a member of the AuroOrchard team protested that a new land marking will give away, in a land exchange, half of the community’s vegetable fields, which provide Auroville with at least ten tones of vegetables a year. AuroOrchard supplies over 60% of all fruits and vegetables produced by Auroville farms. The letter notes that “If these exchanges go through in the manner already decided, AuroOrchard may cease functioning due to the huge loss of cultivated land, crops, investments and motivation for the entire team. This loss can be avoided if we sit together and consider

the alternatives. We have always been open to this discussion and I hope that we can prioritise what Auroville needs more than what the private developers are asking for.”

Outcome of the emergency RAD

The Residents’ Assembly Service (RAS) informed the community of the results of an Emergency Residents’ Assembly Decision-making process, initiated through a petition signed by more than 300 members of the Residents’ Assembly (RA), (1) to approve or disapprove that the Working Committee selected by the RA will coordinate the functions of the Funds and Assets Management Committee of the Residents’ Assembly (RA-FAMC) until such time as the circumstances allow for the selection and functioning of a new FAMC of the RA; and (2) to extend the emergency functions granted to the Working Committee on 14.08.2023, for a period of six months. A total of 538 valid votes were submitted online and in-person. 97% (524) participants voted in favour of the above resolution. It was rejected by 1% (4) participants, while 2% (10) participants expressed they didn’t know. Therefore, the Residents’ Assembly approved the above resolution.

Auroville Council meeting room

The (RA-WCom) informed the community that on March 11th, a number of current and former members of the Auroville Council received an email notice from the Funds and Assets Management Committee constituted by the Governing Board (GB-FAMC) that the unauthorised users of the Auroville Council meeting room on the first floor of the Town Hall have to vacate by March 15th and that strict action will taken against violators and unauthorised users. The room is currently used by essential groups of the RA, such as the Entry Board and Auroville Council, and has been ‘held’ by residents for more than 20 months in a 24-hour vigil. The RA-WCom described the notice as an overreach of power and an intimidation tactic that disregards once more the essential role of the Residents’ Assembly and its duly selected working groups in the day-to-day management of Auroville. The RA-Wcom responded to the GB-FAMC that this room is an important asset for the Residents’ Assembly of Auroville and it has been protected from being taken over for over 20 months now and that this will continue.

Further cuts to maintenances

At the end of February 2024, a number of Aurovilians were notified by the AVFO BCC that their maintenance would be cut, starting 1st March. This follows earlier suggestions to some residents that their work would be “realigned”. 175 residents have already had their maintenances removed, and it is expected that the further maintenance cuts will affect hundreds of Aurovilians who depend on a City Services maintenance for their livelihood in Auroville.

Cuts to community centres’ budgets

In February, Auroville’s Centre for Research in Performing Arts (CRIPA) – a constantly-in-use and free-to-use performance and rehearsal venue – and the Pitanga Cultural Centre, were informed by the GB-FAMC that their funding would be reduced to partial or zero support from April 1st, 2024. The directive gave them less than two months to become self-sufficient – that is, to raise their own funds or start charging for access, instead of providing an open community space for the arts.

Talam stops support of key software

Talam, an Auroville unit that has been providing key software support for many of Auroville’s online services, announced that it will cease to support certain software from 1st April 2024. Talam’s work was supposed to be taken over some time ago by the AVFO-formed group Auroville Integrated Information Service (AIIS), yet AIIS has not done this. Talam

stated, “it has become increasingly challenging for us to maintain and support these projects, given that we were explicitly instructed to cease development and hand them over.” Affected services include the Guest Registration Service and the Matrimandir booking portal.

Community meetings

A community meeting took place in the Kalabhumi amphitheatre on March 16th. The participants were informed, both in Tamil and in English, about the events of the last two years. The actions of the AVFO were criticised and Auroville’s responsibility to care for the welfare of the neighbouring villages was emphasised. On March 21st an associated meditation event, Dream about the Future, was held in the Matrimandir Stone Circle. On March 26th, a community meeting was called by the Residents Assembly Service to create awareness concerning the upcoming selection of members for the following working groups of the Residents’ Assembly: Working Committee, Auroville Council and the Entry Board.

Selection process 2024 opens

Nominations are being invited for the 2024 selection process for the Auroville Council, Admission Committee and Working Committee. Nominations will close on 1st April, and the entire process should be finished by late April. The Working Committee invited residents to take part in the selection process, emphasising that “The Residents’ Assembly is alive and continues to function... Building a strong, united and dedicated community, and manifesting the ‘City the Earth Needs’ is the call of the hour. This is not only our collective responsibility but also our aim for being here, our promise to ourselves and to the Divine Consciousness in the true spirit of Auroville.”

Awards for Auroville architects

Three Auroville architects received awards in the Indian Institute of Architects awards for excellence in architecture 2022. Mona Doctor-Pingel won in the categories ‘Mercantile Retail category for Cottage Showroom’ and ‘Women Architects to the forefront’; Ganesh Bala won in the ‘Adaptive reuse and conservation category’ for an Auromodèle House; and Suhasini Ayer received a commendation in the ‘Residential’ category for Humanscapes. There were a total of 570 entries across India for 26 different categories.

Performances and exhibitions

The women’s choir Auroville Harmonies performed a “Singing the World” concert at CRIPA on 2nd and 3rd March, conducted by Antoine. Ceramic artist Supriya Menon Meneghetti presented an exhibition titled “From Darkness to Light” at Centre d’Art Citadines 8-23 March. The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture presented an exhibition titled “Samsara” by artists Bhavyo and Bhavya, from 4th February to 10th March. On 16th and 17th March there was an Auroville underground music festival at the Youth Center. The Youth Choir conducted by Nuria gave a soul nourishing performance on 23-24 March, and audience members were enchanted by the magical show put up by the Eluciole Circus on 11 March to help raise funds for new equipment. Also, a diverse mix of young musicians lit up the night recently at CRIPA, as they performed soulful melodies and rhythm-driven songs for a concert aimed at spreading love, peace, and unity. The ‘Feel the Vibes’ event featured a varied line-up of musicians and dancers – from a six-year-old vocalist to the senior-most performer who is just 25.

Correction

In the February 2024 issue of Auroville Today, in the opening article titled *A New World Is Born*, it is mentioned that The Mother had the experience that the supramental world already existed in a permanent way on 3rd February, 1959. In fact, the correct date is the February 3rd, 1958. The mistake is regretted.

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Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.